



## Alcimedes – Feb 2013

A hundred years ago, in the East Sussex village of Piltdown, a lawyer and part-time archaeologist (*when such dual careers were possible*) presented the World with one of its greatest-ever finds. The “Piltdown Man” had apparently lain undiscovered for thousands, if not millions of years, only to be awoken abruptly by the sound of Charles Dawson’s over-zealous spade. This discovery was presented as the “missing link” to bridge the evolutionary pathways between humans and apes. Dawson and the Piltdown Man became world famous in the process, and the Latin name *Eoanthropus dawsoni* was soon bestowed upon him to give him even greater credibility.<sup>1</sup> Sussex may have had some elderly residents in its time, but this guy was in a different league.

The unearthing had apparently culminated from numerous passionate excavations in Piltdown in the preceding months with several other discoveries adding to the buzz. However, Piltdown Man was not what he seemed. He wasn’t a missing link after all; in fact, he was just a naughty boy. His mandible was from an orangutan, and his skull, although human, had been deliberately stained to give the appearance of being older than it actually was. Tea bags come in handy when you’re trying to fool the World.

Whether Piltdown Man embraced his own celebrity and boyish charms is not certain. Equally, he may have come to accept that he was nothing more than a dodgy bag of bones. What is clear is that, in spite of his ragged appearance, his overall demeanour was convincing enough for many members of the scientific community to accept him as the real deal. That was, until 1953, when more detailed studies finally ousted him as a hoax.

Although Charles Dawson has never *definitively* been proven to be the hoaxer, his reputation was trashed when the truth unfolded but, as he had died in 1916, he was saved the embarrassment of having to defend any possible dishonesty. Coincidentally, after his death, no further finds were made at Piltdown and a further study of Dawson’s archaeological collection in 2003 suggested that at least 38 specimens were fakes.

December 2012 commemorated the 100th anniversary of Piltdown man’s unearthing, and possibly his creation. The story highlighted the adage of not judging a book by its cover, as well as illustrating that even the scientific community can be fooled by the unscrupulous, especially when something conveniently fills a missing space in a complicated jigsaw.

Fans of Piltdown Man might remind us that he was also a victim in all of this: he had had no say in this forgery and was just the fall-guy planted in the right place at the right time. It is perhaps fitting that he was given his own display at the Natural History Museum in London in 2003 to mark the 50th anniversary

of his unmasking.<sup>2</sup> It probably brought a wry smile to his cobbled, mish-mash face.

Researchers have recently been granted access to the mummified body of the Egyptian King Ramesses III to establish the cause of his death. Writing in the Christmas edition of the BMJ, the scientists performed a full CT scan of his body, and have suggested that he was killed by a stab wound to his neck. The mechanism of his death has been debated for years, as documents have proposed that he died in 1155BC, possibly at the hands of one of his sons, Prince Petawere, or maybe as a result of a violent coup by members of his harem.<sup>3</sup> In spite of these new findings, Alcimedes understands that a cold case review is unlikely.

Abortion is documented as being one of the oldest medical procedures in the World, but attitudes and legislation vary widely across the globe. In the Republic of Ireland, medical termination of pregnancy is only permitted if the mother’s life, rather than her health, is at risk. The recent highly-publicised death of the dentist Savita Halappanavar at the University Hospital, Galway, has re-fuelled the debate, as it has been argued that her life might have been saved had she been granted a termination. As a result, the Irish Government has convened an expert panel to look at the abortion issue in detail and is expected to publish its findings in early 2013 after debate in the Oireachtas (“national parliament” of Ireland).<sup>4</sup>

We all regard death in different ways. One of America’s Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin, is reputed to have said that deaths and taxes were the only certainties in life. William Shakespeare made countless metaphoric references to the inevitability of death with burning candles, breaking waves and falling leaves designed to capture our imaginations. Clever words certainly have their place and may provide comfort to a patient shuffling off this mortal coil, but they don’t control pain anywhere near as well as a hefty dose of diamorphine.

Cue, stage left, the Liverpool Care Pathway for the Dying Patient (LCP). Designed in the late 1990s as a collaboration between the Royal Liverpool University Hospital and the Liverpool Marie Curie Hospice, this palliative care pathway has been adopted across the

UK in approximately 85% of NHS Trusts. It has been held in high regard for years. However, it has attracted negative publicity in recent months when a Freedom of Information request by the Daily Telegraph<sup>5</sup> discovered that Trusts were receiving financial rewards for meeting targets on patients who had been placed on this pathway, even though families and patients were frequently not involved in the decision. Targets for good care may have a place, but whether these should extend to a palliative setting is less clear-cut, since death is the ultimate target.

Not surprisingly, the media presented their findings as patients being bumped-off to make a quick buck. The debate goes on and is likely to unearth some discoveries that are even dodgier than Piltdown Man's long-lost brother. Franklin and Shakespeare are probably turning in their graves, but hopefully in a dignified way and free from nausea and pain.

November 2012 saw The Office of the Children's Commissioner's publication of an interim report into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups (CSEGG).<sup>6</sup> The report published data gathered from England in 2010–2011 and concluded that at least 16,500 children (April 2010–March 2011) were at risk of sexual exploitation within gangs and groups. In addition, 2409 children were confirmed as victims in the period from Aug 2010–Oct 2011, although the report's authors concluded that the true figure was almost certainly much higher.

The report represents the findings as they stand at the end of its first year. The second year of the study will focus on the ways to tackle the sexual exploitation of children, and consider best practices across the country.

The UK Government announced in December 2012 that they would be launching a £100 million project to create a database of patients' DNA sequences.<sup>7</sup> The proposal was met with a mixture of

hope for treatments for cancers and rare disorders, but also with concerns over data privacy and protection. It has been suggested that the DNA sequences will be studied over a three to five year period and will result in 100,000 samples being sequenced. In addition, the study will be anonymised, with patients having the opportunity to opt out if they wish.

The UK Government has obviously got a taste for databases as they have also just announced the launch of a national database in hospitals of children believed to be at risk of abuse or neglect.<sup>8</sup> It is hoped that monitoring the plight of vulnerable children with the "Child Protection – Information System" will help prevent a recurrence of well-publicised cases such as that of Baby P, who was well-known to multiple agencies but who died brutally in 2007 at the hands of his mother, her boyfriend, and her boyfriend's brother. The database will flag a highlight next to any child who has been placed on an at-risk register anywhere in the country. It is suspected that the finalised version of the database will not be launched until 2015.

## References

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